



Private John Breen (Regimental Number 67), having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the bronze beneath the Caribou in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel.



His occupation before military service recorded as that of a *labourer* working for two dollars a day, John Breen presented himself at the *Church Lads Brigade Armoury* on Harvey Road in St. John's, capital city of the Dominion of Newfoundland on August 28 of 1914 – three weeks and three days after the *Declaration of War* – for a medical examination. It was an exercise which was to pronounce him as...*Fit for Foreign Service*.

Five days later, on September 2 – a second paper has August 31 - John Breen returned to the *C.L.B. Armoury*, on this second occasion for enlistment, whereupon he was engaged at the private soldier's daily rate of a single dollar a day plus a ten-cent per diem *Field Allowance*.

A recruit of the First Draft, he was likely now ordered to the tented area by that time established on the shores of *Quidi Vidi Lake* in the East End of St. John's where a four-five week course of training was already under way.

The regimental authorities were *also* busy by now, preparing for the transport of this, the first body of volunteers, to *overseas* - and later to *active – service*.

At the beginning of the month of October of that 1914, a large number of the new recruits underwent attestation; Private Breen was one of that number, taking his oath of allegiance on October 1.

Two days later, after the Newfoundland contingent – it was not as yet a battalion – of 'A' and 'B' Companies had paraded through the city, it embarked onto the Bowring Brothers' vessel *Florizel* which was awaiting in St. John's Harbour.

Private Breen and his comrades-in-arms of the *First Five Hundred* – also to be known to history as the *Blue Puttees* – were now to sit on board ship for the best part of a day as it was not to be until the morrow that *Florizel* would sail to the south coast of the Island and to its rendezvous with the convoy carrying the Canadian Division to the United Kingdom.



(Right above: *The image of Florizel at anchor in the harbour at St. John's is by courtesy of Admiralty House Museum.*)

(Right below: *Fort George, constructed in the latter half of the eighteenth century, still serves the British Army to this day. – photograph from 2011)*

In the United Kingdom this first Newfoundland contingent was to train in three venues during the late autumn of 1914 and then the winter of 1914-1915: firstly in southern England on the Salisbury Plain; then in Scotland at *Fort George* – on the Moray Firth close to Inverness; and lastly at Edinburgh Castle where the unit was to provide the first garrison from outside the British Isles.



(Right below: *The venerable Edinburgh Castle dominates the city from its position on the summit of Castle Hill. – photograph from 2011)*

Some three months later, on May 11, and some seven weeks into spring – although in Scotland there was apparently still snow - the entire Newfoundland unit – by now, ‘A’ and ‘B’ Companies re-enforced by ‘C’, ‘D’, and ‘E’ - was ordered moved from the Scottish capital to *Stobs Camp*, all under canvas and south-eastwards of Edinburgh, in the vicinity of the town of Hawick.



It was to be at *Stobs Camp* that the Newfoundland contingent received the re-enforcements from home – ‘F’ Company which arrived on July 10, 1915 - that would bring its numbers up to that of British Army establishment battalion strength*. The now-formed 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment was thus rendered ready to be ordered on *active service*.

****The number was about fifteen hundred, sufficient to provide four ‘fighting’ companies, two re-enforcement companies and a headquarters staff.***

(Right: *The Newfoundland Regiment marches past on the training ground at Stobs Camp and is presented with its Colours on June 10, 1915. – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs. Lillian Tibbo)*

At the beginning of that August of 1915, the four senior Companies, ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and ‘D’ – Private Breen among their ranks - were then sent south from *Stobs Camp* to undergo a final two weeks of training, as well as an inspection by the King, at Aldershot.



This force, now designated the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment, was thereupon attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.

Meanwhile the two junior Companies, the later-arrived ‘E’ and the aforementioned last-arrived ‘F’, were ordered transferred to Scotland’s west coast, to Ayr, there to provide the nucleus of the newly-forming 2nd (Reserve) Battalion.

(Right: *George V, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, King, Defender of the Faith, Emperor of India* – the photograph is from *Bain News Services* via the *Wikipedia* web-site.)



During that fortnight spent at Aldershot, Private Breen was admitted for a mild venereal problem into the Connaught Military Hospital from August 12 to 19, and therefore did *not* embark with his comrades-in-arms who were by that latter date about to board His Majesty's Transport *Megantic* in Devonport.

Having been discharged after treatment, he was thereupon posted *to duty* to the new Regimental Depot at Ayr.

At the end of this summer of 1915, the once-Royal Borough of Ayr on Scotland's west coast was to begin to serve as the overseas base for the 2nd (Reserve) Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment from where – as of November of 1915 and up until January of 1918 - re-enforcement drafts from home were to be despatched to bolster the 1st Battalion's numbers, at first to the Middle East and then later to the *Western Front*.



(Right above: *An aerial view of Ayr, likely from the period between the Wars: Newton-on Ayr, where were quartered the 'other ranks', is to the left of the River Ayr and the Royal Borough, where were housed the officers, is to the right.* – by courtesy of the *Carnegie Library* at Ayr)



(Right: *The High Street in Ayr as shown on a postcard of the time, the imposing Wallace Tower – it stands to this day (2017) - dominating the scene* – by courtesy of Reverend Wilson Tibbo and Mrs Lillian Tibbo.

It was while Private Breen was serving at the Regimental Depot in Scotland, on October 1, that Private Breen was prevailed upon to re-enlist – his comrades-in-arms had done so at Aldershot while he was in medical care. On this second occasion it was to be *for the duration of the war*.

**At the outset of the War, perhaps because it was felt by the authorities that it would be a conflict of short duration, the recruits enlisted for only a single year. As the War progressed, however, this was obviously going to cause problems and the men were encouraged to re-enlist.*

On November 14, the 1st Re-enforcement Draft – Private Breen one of its number* - from Ayr passed through the English south-coast naval port of Plymouth-Devonport on His Majesty's Transport *Olympic**, sister ship to *Britannic* and to the ill-fated *Titanic*.



It was to join the Newfoundland Battalion which had been fighting at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula* since September 20.

Private Breen boarded His Majesty's Transport *Olympic** – sister ship of *Britannic* and of the ill-starred *Titanic* – on November 14, to sail from the Royal Naval harbour of Devonport where he had disembarked from *Florizel* some thirteen months previously.

(Preceding page: '*Olympic*' on the right and His Majesty's Hospital Ship '*Aquitania*' in the centre of the image, lie at anchor in Mudros Bay in the autumn of 1915 – from an old photograph originally from the *Imperial War Museum*)

**Private Breen was brought up on charges for gambling during the voyage on November 18. It was that piece of paper, the charge sheet, which allowed it to be confirmed that this draft had travelled on HM Transport Olympic.*

Olympic reached *Mudros Harbour* on the Greek island of Lemnos at the end of the month. From there the Newfoundland re-enforcements were to travel the remaining seventy kilometres or so on a smaller vessel, to step ashore at *Suvla Bay* at ten o'clock in the evening on December 1. But the newcomers, however, having arrived there, were to remain to serve at *Suvla* for less than three weeks.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, during those few months of Private Breen's posting to Ayr, the four senior companies of the Newfoundland Regiment, having become the 1st Battalion, had as seen in an earlier paragraph been attached to the 88th Brigade of the 29th Division of the (British) Mediterranean Expeditionary Force and had been despatched to *active service*.



(Right above: *Some of the personnel of 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' Companies of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment at Aldershot in August of 1915, prior to leaving for active service – from The Fighting Newfoundlander by Col. G.W.L. Nicholson, C.D.)*

On August 20, 1915, the Newfoundland unit had embarked in the Royal Navy Harbour of Devonport on England's south coast, onto the requisitioned passenger-liner *Megantic* for passage to the Middle East and to the fighting against the Turks. There, a month later – having spent some two weeks billeted in British barracks in the vicinity of the Egyptian capital, Cairo - on September 20, the 1st Battalion had landed at *Suvla Bay* on the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.



(Right above: *The image of Megantic, here in her peace-time colours of a 'White Star Line' vessel, is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries web-site.)*

(continued)

(Right: *Kangaroo Beach, where the officers and men of the 1st Battalion, Newfoundland Regiment, landed on the night of September 19-20, 1915, is to be seen in the distance at the far end of Suvla Bay. The remains of a landing-craft are still clearly visible in the foreground on 'A' Beach. – photograph taken in 2011*)



(Right below: *Newfoundland troops on board a troop-ship anchored at Mudros: either Megantic on August 29, Ausonia on September 18, or Prince Abbas on September 19 – Whichever the case, they were yet to land on Gallipoli. – from Provincial Archives*)



* * * * *

When Private Breen and the 1st Re-enforcement Draft from Ayr landed from their transport ship at *Suvla Bay* they disembarked into a campaign that was already on the threshold of collapse.

(Right: *a century later, the area, little changed from those far-off days, of the Newfoundland positions at Suvla, and where Private Richardson served during the fall of 1915 – photograph from 2011*)



Not only in the area where the Newfoundland Battalion would serve but, ever since the very first days of the operation in April of 1915, the entire *Gallipoli Campaign*, including the operation at *Suvla Bay*, was to prove to be little more than a debacle:

Flies, dust, disease, the frost-bite and the floods – and of course the casualties inflicted by an enemy which was to fight a great deal better than the British High Command* had ever anticipated – were eventually to overwhelm the British-led forces and those of the French, and it would finally be decided to abandon not only *Suvla Bay* but the entire *Gallipoli* venture.

(Right: *An un-identified Newfoundland soldier in the trenches at Suvla Bay – from Provincial Archives*)



**Many of the commanders chosen were second-rate, had been brought out of retirement, and had little idea of how to fight – let alone of how to win. One of the generals at Suvla, apparently, had handed in his resignation during the Campaign and had just gone home.*

November 25 would see the nadir of the Newfoundland Battalion's fortunes at Gallipoli; there was to be a freak rain-, snow- and ice-storm strike the *Suvla Bay* area and the subsequent floods had wreaked havoc amongst the forces of both sides. For several days, survival rather than the enemy was to be the priority.

There were to be many casualties on both sides, some of them, surprised by the sudden inundation of their positions, fatalities who had drowned in their trenches – although no Newfoundlanders were to be among that number. Numerous, however, had been those afflicted by trench-foot and by frost-bite.

On the night of December 19-20, the British had abandoned the area of *Suvla Bay* – the Newfoundlanders, the only non-British unit to serve there, to form a part of the rear-guard. Some of the Battalion personnel had been evacuated to the nearby island of *Imbros*, some to *Lemnos*, further away, but in neither case was the respite to be of a long duration; the 1st Battalion would be transferred only two days later to the area of *Cape Helles*, on the western tip of the *Gallipoli Peninsula*.



(Right above: *Cape Helles as seen from the Turkish positions on the misnamed Achi Baba, positions which were never breached: The Newfoundland positions were to the right-hand side of the picture. – photograph from 2011*)

The British and the *Anzac* forces – the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps was also to serve at *Gallipoli* – were now to be only marking time until a complete withdrawal of the *Peninsula* could be undertaken.



(Right: *'W' Beach at Cape Helles as it was only days before the final British evacuation – from Illustration*)

This final operation would take place on the night of January 8-9, the Newfoundland Battalion to furnish part of the British rear-guard on this second occasion also.



**Lieutenant Owen Steele of St. John's, Newfoundland, is cited as having been the last soldier of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force to step into the final small boat – with General Maude - to sail from the Gallipoli Peninsula.*

(Right above: *'W' Beach almost a century after its abandonment by British forces in that January of 1916 and by the Newfoundlanders who were to be the last soldiers off the beach: Vestiges of the wharves in the black-and-white picture are still to be seen. – photograph from 2011*)

Immediately after the British had evacuated the entire *Gallipoli Peninsula* in January of 1916, the Newfoundland Battalion was to be ordered to the Egyptian port-city of *Alexandria*, arriving there on the 15th of that month. The Newfoundlanders were then to be immediately transferred southward to the vicinity of *Suez*, a port at the southern end of the Canal which bears the same name, there to await further orders since, at the time, the subsequent destination of the British 29th Division had yet to be decided*.



****Bulgaria had entered the conflict on the side of the Central Powers, and Salonika was soon to become a theatre of war.***

(Right above: The British destroy their supplies during the final evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The men of the 1st Battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment were among the last to leave on two occasions, at both Suvla Bay and Cape Helles. – photograph taken from the battleship Cornwallis from Illustration)

After a two-month interim spent in the vicinity of Port Suez, the almost six-hundred officers and *other ranks* of the 1st Battalion were to board His Majesty's Transport *Alaunia* at Port Tewfiq, on March 14 to begin the voyage through the *Suez Canal* en route to France.



The Newfoundlanders would disembark eight days afterwards in the Mediterranean port-city of Marseilles, on March 22.

(Right above: Port Tewfiq at the south end of the Suez Canal as it was just prior to the Great War – from a vintage post-card)

Some three days after the unit's disembarkation on March 22, the Newfoundland Battalion's train was to find its way to the small provincial town of Pont-Rémy, a thousand kilometres to the north of Marseilles. It had been a cold, miserable journey, the blankets provided for the troops having inexcusably travelled unused in a separate wagon.

Having de-trained at the local station at two o'clock in the morning, the Newfoundlanders were now still to endure the long, dark march ahead of them before they would reach their billets at Buigny l'Abbé.

It is doubtful if many of those tired soldiers were to pay much attention to the slow-moving stream flowing under the bridge over which they had then marched on their way from the station. But some three months later *the Somme* would become a part of their history.

(Right: A languid River Somme as seen from the bridge at Pont-Rémy – photograph from 2010)



On April 13, the 1st Battalion had subsequently marched into the village of Englebelmer – perhaps some fifty kilometres in all from Pont-Rémy - where it would be billeted, would receive re-enforcements from Scotland via Rouen and, in two days' time, would be introduced into the communication trenches of the *Western Front*.

Just days following the Newfoundland Battalion's arrival on the *Western Front*, two of the four Companies – 'A', and 'B' – were to take over several support positions from a British unit* before the entire Newfoundland unit was to then be ordered to move further up for the first time into forward positions on April 22.

(continued)

****It should be said that the Newfoundland Battalion and two-hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles who were serving at the time in the 2nd Lincolnshire Regiment Battalion, were then the only units at the Somme from outside the British Isles - true also on the day of the attack on July 1.***

Having then withdrawn, at the end of April after their first tour in the trenches, to the areas of Maily-Maillet and Louvencourt where they would be based for the next two months, the Newfoundlanders were soon to be preparing – this to include the construction of a light railway in the Louvencourt area - for the now-impending British campaign of that summer. It was to be fought on the ground named for the languid, meandering river, *the Somme*, flowing sedately – as it still does today – through the region on its journey to the sea.

(Right above: A part of of the re-constructed trench system in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel, the wire these days to keep the tourists out of the trenches – photograph from 2007(?))

(Right above: A second view of the re-constructed trench system to be found in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2009(?))

If there is one name and date in Newfoundland history which is etched in the collective once-national memory, it is that of Beaumont-Hamel on July 1 of 1916; and if any numbers are remembered, they are those of the eight-hundred who went *over the top* in the third wave of the attack on that morning, and of the sixty-eight unwounded present at muster some twenty-four hours later*.

(Right above: Beaumont-Hamel: Looking from the British lines down the hill to Y Ravine Cemetery which today stands atop part of the German front-line defences: The Danger Tree is to the right in the photograph. – photograph taken in 2009)

(Right: A view of Hawthorn Ridge Cemetery Number 2 in the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont-Hamel – photograph from 2009(?))

****Perhaps ironically, the majority of the Battalion’s casualties was to be incurred during the advance from the third line of British trenches to the first line from where the attack proper was to be made, and while struggling through British wire laid to protect the British positions from any German attack.***



There are other numbers of course: the fifty-seven thousand British casualties incurred in four hours on that same morning of which nineteen-thousand recorded as having been *killed in action or died of wounds*.

It was to be the largest disaster ever in the annals of the British Army...and, perhaps just as depressing, the butchery of *the Somme* was to continue for the next four and a half months.

(Preceding page: *Beaumont-Hamel is a commune, not a village*. – photographs from 2010 and 2015)

In fact, Beaumont-Hamel was a commune – it still exists today – at the time comprising two communities: Beaumont, a village on the German side of the lines, and Hamel which was behind those of the British. No-Man’s-Land, on which the Newfoundland Memorial Park lies partially today, was on land that separated Beaumont from Hamel.

(Right above: *A grim, grainy image purporting to be Newfoundland - dead awaiting burial after Beaumont-Hamel – from...?*)

(Right: *Yet another image of the field between the communities of Beaumont and Hamel on which was fought the Newfoundlanders’ battle on the first day of First Somme.* – photograph from 2010(?))

The son of Jacob Breen (deceased September 9, 1912) and of Catherine Breen (née *Cain*, also found as *Kane*) - to whom he had allotted a daily sixty cents from his pay and had also willed his all - of 43, Alexander Street in St. John’s - his own residence was recorded as 18, Nunnery Hill, also in the city – he was also sister to Annie (*Mary Anne?*)*.

**The above family information requires confirmation.*

(Right above: *The sacrifice of private John Breen is commemorated and honoured on this family memorial which lies in the Mount Carmel Roman Catholic Cemetery, St. John’s.* – photograph from 2022)

Private Breen was reported as *missing in action* while serving with ‘A’ Company at Beaumont-Hamel on the first day of *the Somme*, July 1, 1916. Six months later, on December 31, 1916, he was officially *presumed dead*.

John Breen had enlisted at a *declared* twenty-two years of age.

(Right: *The photograph of Private Breen is from the Provincial Archives.*)

(continued)



Private John Breen was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



The above dossier has been researched, compiled and produced by Alistair Rice. Please email any suggested amendments or content revisions if desired to criceadam@yahoo.ca. Last updated – January 19, 2023.